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SUBJECT: BRENT SYMONETTE NAMED BAHAMIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: NASSAU 559

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires D. Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham tapped Free National Movement (FNM) Deputy Party Leader Brent Symonette as The Bahamas' new Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs May 4. Symonette is a successful businessman and a former Attorney General and Minister of Tourism in previous FNM governments. The appointment of Symonette, a good friend of the United States with excellent ties to Embassy leadership, is a sign of Prime Minister Ingraham's commitment to a close and productive U.S. relationship. Symonette, whose father was the last pre-independence premier of The Bahamas, is one of a handful of white Bahamians who have remained engaged in post-independence Bahamian politics. Symonette is a pragmatic, no-nonsense leader with limited tolerance for inefficiency. We can expect him to be a strong partner for the U.S., who will be more decisive and more inclined to support U.S. positions than his predecessor. He will almost certainly focus less on relations with Cuba and he will be less engaged in CARICOM and the Non-Aligned Movement than Fred Mitchell. At the same time, Symonette is a strong Bahamian nationalist, who will be jealously protective of Bahamian economic, trade and business interests. As he is new to international diplomacy, we have an opportunity to shape his perceptions early on priority U.S. concerns such as a Proliferation Security Agreement and UN human rights issues. END SUMMARY.

INGRAHAM SWORN IN, SYMONETTE NAMED FOREIGN MINISTER

12. (SBU) On May 4, Hubert Ingraham was formally sworn in as Prime Minister of The Bahamas (reftel). In keeping with his reputation as a man of quick action, Ingraham immediately named FNM Deputy Leader Brent Symonette as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The appointment of Symonette as DPM and the Bahamas' representative to foreign governments was seen in part as Ingraham's response to the PLP's effort to play the race card during the campaign against Symonette and the FNM -- whose roots go back to the white-dominated UBP of the pre-independence Bahamas. In a move that will strengthen party unity, Ingraham also named Tommy Turnquest, who had to step down as party leader in 2006 to make way for Ingraham's return to active politics, to the key Ministries of National Security and Immigration. Claire

Hepburn, a private attorney with limited political involvement, was named Attorney General. The rest of Cabinet will be named and sworn in the evening of May 7, and Post will report septel regarding other cabinet assignments.

AN EXPERIENCED BUSINESSMAN WITH A POLITICAL LEGACY

13. (U) Brent Symonette was born in Nassau, The Bahamas on December 2, 1954. He is the son of Sir Roland Symonette, the first and last Premier of The Bahamas. He is married to Robin Symonette, nee Mactaggart, also of Nassau. They have three children, who attend school in Britain. Symonette attended prep school at St. Andrew's School in Nassau and at Leys School, Cambridge, England. He attended college at Brunel University, London, where he earned a Bachelor of Science with honors in Politics and Law. He was called to the Bar as a member of the Inner Temple, London and to The Bahamas Bar n 1978. Symonette was appointed to the Senate, the non-elected and less prestigious branch of the legislature, in 1987 by FNM founder and opposition leader Sir Cecil Wallace Whitfield. He was again appointed to the Senate from 1992-2002 by Prime Minister Ingraham. From 1992-2002, Symonette served at various times as Minister of Tourism, Attorney General, Chairman of the Hotel Corporation and Chairman of the Airport Authority. (COMMENT: Symonette was accused of conflict of interest in his capacity as Chairman of the Airport Authority for awarding a contract for a runway repair to a company he in which he owned an interest. Recognizing his mistake, he resigned to avoid the conflict, but defended his decision as an award to the low bidder able to do the job in the necessary timeframe. END COMMENT.)

14. (SBU) In 2002, Symonette was elected Member of Parliament for the wealthy Montagu constituency, where he served as the FNM's only member of Parliament from the island of New Providence. While in opposition, Symonette served as the Opposition spokesman on foreign affairs. In 2005, he decided to stand for Deputy Leader of the FNM once he knew that Hubert Ingraham was prepared to return to front-line politics. He was subsequently voted Deputy Leader, reportedly to help balance the fiery Ingraham with his calm, thoughtful demeanor in the 2007 elections. Symonette's deep ties with the Bahamian business community and access to local investors contributed to his appeal to the party faithful. In the recent elections, he won a newly-created St. Anne's constituency with the second highest margin of victory of any candidate.

15. (U) Among the wealthiest individuals in Bahamian politics, Symonette reported \$56 million in net worth in required pre-election disclosures. However, those disclosures reportedly do not include interests held in trust or partnership, and some estimate Symonette's wealth to exceed \$250 million. Symonette nevertheless lives modestly and supports many causes without fanfare and behind the scenes. He has been involved in many local tourism developments, including Mount Vernon, Royal Valley and Vista Marina West. His business interests reportedly include Bahamas Hot Mix, Commonwealth Bank, Bahamas Fast Ferries, Abaco Markets, Town Centre Mall, Cost-Rite Wholesale and Solomon's Wholesale. Symonette is a member of the East Nassau Rotary Club, an avowed environmentalist, and is deeply involved in local charities. Vocal about the need to balance development with the long term protection of the Bahamian environment, and determined to protect Bahamian beaches for public use, Symonette recently sold his interests in a popular local beach to the government for \$1 to keep the beach public and undeveloped.

BAHAMIAN PATRIOT WITH A POINT TO MAKE

16. (C) Symonette's father was Premier of The Bahamas under the United Bahamian Party, acting as head of Government under British rule from 1955 to 1964, and under self-rule from 1964 to 1969, before The Bahamas achieved majority rule. A symbol of white repression of black Bahamians, Sir Roland and the

UBP actively fought majority rule. Brent Symonette's UBP heritage has been a political liability, and became a focus of PLP campaigning leading up to elections in the overwhelmingly (85 percent) black Bahamas. While safe in his wealthy Eastern constituency, some public perceptions of Symonette have inescapably been tied to issues of race and Sir Roland's minority rule legacy. The PLP went out of their way to exploit his father's past -- with mixed success. The FNM victory in the face of PLP charges that Ingraham intended to turn power over to Symonette, who would then "turn back" to the era of racial discrimination suggests a growing political maturity among a majority of Bahamian voters for whom such racial politics had limited traction.

17. (C) Symonette was defiant of PLP campaign efforts to marginalize him because of his race and legacy. At one pre-election rally he boldly declared: "I am proud of my father, and I will remain proud of him all my life. I am Bahamian, and I have every right to be Member of Parliament, so take that Mr. Christie!" In fact, Symonette derives extra motivation from his desire to ensure that all Bahamians, black and white alike, can participate in the political life of The Bahamas. His willingness to face the barrage of PLP attacks in a political campaign and to stand up for his father despite a difficult legacy are telling of a highly motivated and strong-minded politician. Symonette is fond of recounting how his father rose from poverty to wealth on the Bahamian island of Eleuthera, highlighting his family as a Bahamian success story rather than a symbol of inherited privilege. Symonette likely regards his election and appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs as vindication for his and his father's hard work, but also for a future where black and white Bahamians alike can contribute to building their country.

18. (C) His patriotism comes with a nationalist streak, and Symonette believes that more needs to be done to channel trade and investment opportunities toward Bahamian business interests over foreign investors, perhaps understandable considering his not-inconsequential local holdings. He has often remarked that the Bahamian government is more willing to offer incentives to foreigners than to locals. Given that PM Ingraham campaigned against PLP land "give-aways" to foreigners, Symonette will likely be cautious in rolling out the red carpet for foreign investors. For environmental reasons, Symonette opposes the pending liquefied natural gas project proposed for Ocean Cay by American companies, though the deal may have support elsewhere in the government. In parliament during the run-up to elections, Symonette has been openly critical of potential Bahamian participation in free trade agreements, saying: "I am nervous about the pressure being brought on The Bahamas to join various trade groups . . . I think we are running into dangerous waters and unless someone can convince me otherwise, we are not going to collect in VAT what we are currently collecting in import tax."

SYMONETTE A RELUCTANT FM, BUT GREAT FRIEND TO POST

19. (C) FNM insiders had predicted that former Bahamian Ambassador to the U.S., Joshua Sears, would be named Foreign Minister. Asked last summer by the Charge about his potential portfolios in an FNM government, Symonette dismissed the idea of serving as Foreign Minister saying he could not see himself sitting for hours in "endless, unproductive meetings with CARICOM officials." However, with Sears losing his race for Parliament, and with Symonette's experience as opposition spokesperson on Foreign Affairs, he and the Prime Minister apparently had a change of heart.

10. (C) Symonette has been a frank and open interlocutor for, and good friend to, Post. In recent years, he has been a valuable contact on political and economic issues. He and the Charge -- whose residence is next door to Symonette's -- enjoy a close personal relationship reinforced by family friendships. The Charge enjoys direct access to Symonette, and expects that the new professional relationship will

benefit from the outstanding communication they enjoy. The Charge has found Symonette to be direct, pragmatic, and generally pro-U.S., though a staunch defender of Bahamian national interests.

COMMENT: A BEST CASE SCENARIO FOR U.S INTERESTS

¶11. (C) Symonette's appointment as Foreign Minister is a best-case scenario for the U.S. Ingraham's decision to tap his Deputy Prime Minister, a known friend of the U.S., as Minister of Foreign Affairs reflects Ingraham's understanding of the importance of the U.S. relationship and Ingraham's commitment to making it work for both sides. It may also have reflected a recognition that Symonette's extensive web of local business activities could have created conflicts of interest with other portfolios, as was the case with the airport contract in his last administration. (Symonette also had little interest in positions, such as Minister of Works, repairing roads and installing stoplights.) Symonette's pragmatism, openness to the U.S. and our views, and direct channels of communication with Post promise a stronger, more productive relationship than under the often brooding, sensitive, and aloof Fred Mitchell.

¶12. (C) Symonette has been a vocal supporter of a free press and human rights, and Post believes he will generally offer more consistent support for U.S. positions on human rights issues internationally. Symonette will also strongly support our core counter-drug and migrant interdiction programs. His Bahamian nationalist focus may lead to a more pragmatic direction in Foreign Affairs that abandons former Minister Mitchell's penchant for world travel, building distant ties with India and China, and activism in the Non-Aligned Movement. Given his avowed skepticism of the value of CARICOM, we expect that Symonette will keep Bahamian engagement with its neighbors to the minimum necessary for good relations. With Bahamian national issues dominating his focus, regional and big picture international issues will likely fade as priorities. As a result, we expect the Bahamas' flirtation with Cuba to cool, potentially reducing Bahamian presence in Cuba from an Embassy to a Consulate. We also hope that Symonette's pragmatic orientation will lead to greater receptiveness to concluding a Proliferation Security Initiative agreement -- which had languished over the past year with the indecisive PLP government.

HARDT